United States Department of Agriculture
Economic Research Service
The Economics of Food, Farming, Natural Resources, and Rural America

Data Sets

Organic Production

Overview

Organic farming has been one of the fastest growing segments of U.S. agriculture for over a decade. The U.S. had under a million acres of certified organic farmland when Congress passed the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990. By the time USDA implemented national organic standards in 2002, certified organic farmland had doubled, and doubled again between 2002 and 2005. Organic livestock sectors have grown even faster. ERS collected data from USDA-accredited State and private certification groups to calculate the extent of certified organic farmland acreage and livestock in the United States. These are presented in 13 tables showing the change in U.S. organic acreage and livestock numbers from 1992 to 2008 (see the U.S. tables section). Data for 1997 and 2000-08 are presented by State and commodity (see the State tables section).

U.S. producers dedicated approximately 4.8 million acres of farmland—2.7 million acres of cropland and 2.1 million acres of rangeland and pasture—to organic production systems in 2008. California remains the leading State in certified organic cropland, with over 430,000 acres, largely (over 40 percent) used for fruit and vegetable production. Other top States for certified organic cropland include Wisconsin, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. Forty-five States also had some certified organic rangeland and pasture in 2008, and 13 States had more than 100,000 acres, reflecting strong growth in the U.S. organic dairy sector between 2005 and 2008.

Adoption of organic farming systems showed strong gains between 2002 and 2008, averaging a 15 percent annual increase in cropland acreage during this period. While the adoption rate remains high, the overall adoption level is still low—only about 0.7 percent of all U.S. cropland and 0.5 percent of all U.S. pasture was certified organic in 2008. Obstacles to adoption by farmers include high managerial costs and risks of shifting to a new way of farming, limited awareness of organic farming systems, lack of marketing and infrastructure, and inability to capture marketing economies. Still, many U.S. producers are embracing organic farming in order to lower input costs, conserve nonrenewable resources, capture high-value markets, and boost farm income.

Adoption Levels Vary by Sector

Government efforts to boost organic production have focused initially on developing national certification standards to assure consumers of consistent product quality and on streamlining interstate commerce in organically grown products. In 2008, Congress included new provisions in the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act (2008 Farm Act) that expand support for the organic sector (see 2008 Farm Act Provisions). Also, many USDA agencies have started or expanded programs and pilot projects to help organic producers with production and marketing problems and risks.

Fifty-nine organic certification organizations, including 17 State programs and 3 county programs in California, conducted third-party certification of organic production and handling in 2008. USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service implements national legislation and implemented rules in October 2002 that require all except the smallest organic growers (less than $5,000 in sales) be

certified by a State or private agency accredited under USDA's national organic standards.

Organic farming systems rely on practices such as cultural and biological pest management, and virtually prohibit synthetic chemicals in crop production and antibiotics or hormones in livestock production. For example, organic farmers provide habitat for predators and parasites of crop pests, rotate crops to maintain soil fertility, and cycle animal and green manures as fertilizer. Organic livestock growers try to accommodate an animal's natural nutritional and behavioral requirements.

Overall, certified organic cropland and pasture accounted for about 0.6 percent of U.S. total farmland in 2008. Only a small percentage of the top U.S. field crops—corn (0.2 percent), soybeans (0.2 percent), and wheat (0.7 percent)—were grown under certified organic farming systems. On the other hand, organic carrots (13 percent of U.S. carrot acreage), organic lettuce (8 percent), organic apples (5 percent) and other fruit and vegetable crops were more commonly organic grown in 2008. Markets for organic vegetables, fruits, and herbs have been developing for decades in the United States, and fresh produce is still the top-selling organic category in retail sales. Organic livestock was beginning to catch up with produce in 2008, with 2.7 percent of U.S. dairy cows and 1.5 percent of the layer hens managed under certified organic systems.

Data Files

Organic production tables are in .xls format. Each workbook contains multiple years of data in worksheets that are accessed through tabs. State-level tables cover the years 1997 and 2000 through 2008. National-level tables also include data from earlier years.

National Tables	
	Table 1. List of USDA accredited organic certification programs. Certifiers' names, locations, and number of producers certified in 2002 through 2008.
	Table 2. U.S. certified organic farmland acreage, livestock numbers, and farm operations. Data on acreage for pasture/rangeland and cropland, 1992-2008. Information on number of certified organic animals by type (livestock and poultry) is also provided.
	Table 3. Certified organic and total U.S. acreage, selected crops and livestock, 1995-2008. Data on acreage for different grains, beans, oilseeds, vegetables, fruits, and number of animals.
State-Level Tables	
	Table 4. Certified organic producers, pasture, and cropland. Number of certified operations, by State, 2000-08. Total acreage of pasture and cropland by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 5. Certified organic livestock. Data on cows, pigs, sheep, chickens and other poultry, by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 6. Certified organic grains. Acres of corn, wheat, oats, barley, sorghum, rice, spelt, millet, buckwheat, and rye by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 7. Certified organic beans. Acres of soybeans, dry beans, dry peas/lentils by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 8. Certified organic oilseeds. Acres of flax, sunflowers, and unclassified oilseeds by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 9. Certified organic hay and silage. Acres of alfalfa hay, haylage/silage, and other hay/pasture by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 10. Certified organic vegetables. Acres of tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, mixed vegetables, and unclassified vegetables by State, 1997 and 2000-08.

	Table 11. Certified organic fruit. Acres of tree nuts, citrus, apples, grapes, and unclassified fruits by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 12. Certified organic herbs, nursery and greenhouse. Acres of herbs, cut flowers, mushrooms, and greenhouse/nursery by State, 1997 and 2000-08.
	Table 13. Certified organic acreage of other crops. Acres of cotton, peanuts, potatoes, green manure cover crops, trees for maple syrup, fallow, and unclassified by State, 1997 and 2000-08.

Glossary

Definitions used in these data are drawn from the final rule for the USDA's National Organic Program, administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service.

Related Resources

- Organic Agriculture Briefing Room
- Organic Farmgate and Wholesale Prices Data Set
- Procurement and Contracting by Organic Handlers Data Set

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